

The following article is proof that the practice of releasing the test pool is a huge mistake. All of the amateur radio tests can be passed by memorization. Please note that the ARRL is proposing to do away with the code requirement, and grant General Class licenses to current Technicians. As this article explains, a Technician License can be obtained in an afternoon. Therefore, what the ARRL is proposing is that an afternoon's study is all that is needed to obtain a General class license. Please stop publishing the test pool questions and answers. The testing system is a complete farce.

Is Your Club's Amateur Radio License Class Efficient?

By John Portune, W6NBC
April 25, 2004

After trial and error, the author hits upon the idea of maximizing the use of short-term memory to increase the success rate of students studying for an Amateur Radio license.

Amateur Radio clubs often teach licensing classes. Prospective hams traditionally come once a week for a three-hour evening lecture. The complete course lasts a number of weeks and at a later date the graduate attends a separate session for a VE license exam.



Students study during one of six 45-minute sessions this February at Estero Radio Club's "Get Your Ham Radio License in One Day." [John Portune, W6NBC, photo]

Is this what your club does? Have you ever asked yourself, "Does this really work?" How many who enroll in your classes ever follow through to a license? Just a few? If so, then perhaps there's a better way for people to get their license, one that's enjoyed 85% success in the San Francisco Bay area for nearly 10 years now.

I began teaching ham license classes in the 1970s. I, too, assumed the traditional long-class method was the best. That's what other clubs did. Over the years, however, I

became very frustrated. No matter how good the instruction, very few "first-nighters" ever stayed for the entire course. Something was wrong. The public wouldn't endure.

So I speculated, "Could I do it in just *one day*?" That would take the sting from the long traditional class, but was teaching a complete ham licensing class in only one day even possible? Could a prospective ham master the material in so short a time? To find out, I took a chance. In September 1995, I nervously posted a "Get Your Ham License in One Day" announcement on the bulletin board at work, a large electronics firm in San Jose.

The Eight-Hour Experiment

Three weeks later, I met the group in the morning for the experiment. I did nothing more than provide them with a printed copy of the Technician Question Pool and set them only to reading it for three hours--no lecturing, no explaining, no teaching. We took 15-minute breaks every hour, had lunch at noon and came back for three hours in the afternoon. At 4 PM we administered the test. It was all over in just one day.

To my astonishment, only one of 24 did not pass. From that day onward, we've done it exactly the same way--no lecture, no class, no theory...just a disciplined reading of the question pool. It is a winning formula, even if we stumbled onto it by accident.



With many students bringing little or no radio knowledge to the one-day session, the program still boasts an 85% pass rate on the exam. [John Portune, W6NBC, photo]

In the intervening years, hundreds have succeeded this way. Never have we fallen below an 85% success rate. Our youngest was 10, the oldest over 90. What's more, few knew anything in advance about ham radio or electronics, so it isn't just engineers who can pass this way. Short-term memory and the discipline we provide is the key to success, not technical knowledge.

When we expanded the program, some began to wonder, as you may now be doing, "Is this method a good idea?" Does it produce adequately qualified hams, or can only a longer conventional class do that? I wondered this myself. Time, however, has provided the answer. In the San Francisco Bay area, where the program flourishes, there is not a wide-area repeater that does not today boast our graduates. But are they "substandard"?

On-the-Air Training

One-day license graduates have demonstrated that getting a license quickly does indeed adequately fulfill the intent of ham radio law and practice. Our graduates are not substandard, and there is a very good reason why. Long before the day of published question pools, volunteer examiners and the potential for a one-day license, the intent of the law was clear that most of a ham's training would take place "on the air." Actually being on the air is how all new hams, not just our graduates, learn to follow the rules. Our hobby has long been justly proud of this.

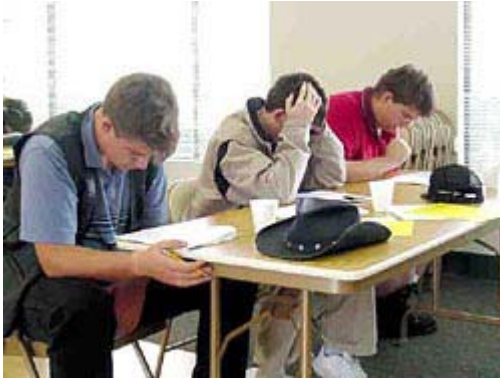
At the end of every session, we encourage those who pass to join a local radio club and provide successful candidates with a list of area contacts. Many of our VEs also volunteer to be Elmers and we match up interested new hams with seasoned amateurs.

What's more, the broad appeal of our program attracts a much wider range of the public to the hobby than the conventional approach. If nothing else, it helps to dispel the classic image of a ham as a "technical egghead."

Here's one final example of the value of a one-day license: We've found that many of our graduates make their way into public service and volunteer emergency communications programs. They tell us they *only* enrolled in our program to become active in these programs. RV, boating and model airplane enthusiasts say much the same thing. They tell us that had it not been possible to earn a license quickly, they would not have become hams.

Details of the Program

Applicants attend for only one day, 8:30 AM to 5 PM. Sessions are not classes; they are merely guided study: six 45-minute pool reading sessions with breaks and lunch. This maintains good attention span and minimizes study fatigue. We do nothing more than tell them how to read the pool. For the bulk of the day we merely keep the students moving in an organized way. Finally, while their short-term memory is full of Amateur Radio, we give them the test. It has proven to be a winning formula in terms of passing the exams.



The one-day license study sessions take advantage of the brain's short term memory capabilities. A VE exam session is held immediately after the final study period. [John Portune, W6NBC, photo]

Attendees must be present all day -- no exceptions. We don't admit them if they come more than a few minutes late. To emphasize, utilizing short-term memory is the simple secret. Volunteer examiners may not change on the exam the wording of the questions or the text of any of the answer choices. Exam questions must be exactly as the applicant reads them in the pool. This is no doubt the main reason 85% can easily recognize the correct answers after six hours of carefully reading the pool.

We do also permit attendees alternately to read the General class pool. It is about the same size as the Technician pool. The Amateur Extra pool is much too large for one day. We only allow someone to read the Extra pool at a session by special request and with previous study. We do not attempt Morse code in one day.

We have also found that attendees should be at least 16 years old. Younger applicants are capable of passing, but we only admit them if an adult agrees to stay with them the entire day. *The exam session at 4 PM is open to the public and* we administer all four elements. Those who only want to take a test need not attend all day, as the exam is actually a separate VE testing session. Anyone, in fact, can conduct the reading portion of the day and need not be VE certified or even licensed. This is often a good job for radio club volunteers. Certified VEs only attend the exam session. We charge a separate fee, other than the prescribed \$12 exam fee, to attend the pool-reading portion of the day.



In our view, "Get Your License in One Day" is having a very positive influence on ham radio. Our graduates are building the hobby. We encourage you to consider doing the same in your ham community or club. We will be very happy to assist you as you get to know the ropes of this method of study. It's a non-profit volunteer program that we hope will spread.

John Portune, W6NBC, was first licensed as an amateur in 1965, although he earned a General Radiotelephone ticket in 1961. He was also licensed as G5AJH

for five years. A retired NBC and Sony television engineer who is active on most bands with most modes, he greatly enjoys his work as a VE team leader, is active in ARES and maintains a Web site at www.w6nbc.com. The author of various articles in ham and electronics magazines, Portune can be reached via e-mail at jportune@w6nbc.com.

PHOTO A: <session.JPG>

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